Marcel Ray Duriez

Nevaeh

Book: 22

Lips Together

Chapter: 129

Part: 1

Hanna

Hanna- Two days later we receive the results of my boards-all passes-and my final score: Eight. My aunt hugs me; the first time she has hugged me in years.

My uncle pats me on the shoulder awkwardly and gives me the largest piece of chicken at dinner. Even Jenny looks impressed by this.

Olivia rams the top of her head into my leg, one, two, three times, and I step away from her, tell her to stop fussing. I know she is upset that I will be leaving her soon. We do a lot all as girlfriends.

But that's life, and the sooner she gets used to it, the better.

I received my 'Approved Matches' too, a list of four names and statistics-age, scores, interests, recommended career path, salary projections-printed neatly on a white

sheet of paper with the Pittsburgh city crest at its top.

At least Maddie is not on it. I recognize only one name: Kellie. she has bright hair now and teeth that stick out like not much yet is cute. I only know him because once when I was playing outside last year with me, he started chanting, ‘There goes the retard and the orphan Maggie,’ and without really thinking about what I was doing, I scooped up a rock from the ground and turned around and hurled it in his direction. It caught him on the

temple. For a second his eyes crossed and uncrossed.

He lifted his fingers to his head, and when he pulled them away, they were dark with blood. For days afterward, I was terrified to go out, terrified I would be arrested and thrown in the Vaults. Shy- now owned a tech services firm and was a volunteer regulator besides. I was convinced she would come after me for what I had done to his son doing that thing on his little man as an RN.

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Part: 2

Kellie- (Now)

My arms are aching, and whenever I close my eyes, I see barcodes, and then I am so sleepy I am not even embarrassed to be out in public wearing my paint spotted Save a lot of T-shirt, which is about ten sizes too big for me.

Hanna looks away, biting her lip. I have not spoken to her since that night at the party and I am searching desperately for something to say, something casual and normal.

It suddenly seems incredible to me that this was my best friend, that we could spend time together for days and never run out of things to talk about, that I would come home from her house with my throat sore from laughing. It is like there is a glass wall between us now, invisible but impenetrable.

I finally produce, ‘I got my matches,’ while Hana blurts out, ‘Why didn’t you call me back?’

Both of us paused, startled, and then again startup at the same time. I

say, ‘You called?’ and Hana says, ‘Did you accept yet?’

‘You first,’ I say.

Hanna seems uncomfortable. She looks at the sky, at a small child standing across the street in a baggy swimsuit, at the two men loading buckets of something into a truck down the street- everywhere but at me. ‘I left you, like, three messages.’

‘I never got any messages,’ I say quickly, my heart speeding up. For weeks I have been pissed that Hana did not try to reach out to me after the

party- pissed and hurt. But I told myself it was better this way.

I told myself Hana had changed, and she would not have much to say to me anymore.

Hana is looking at me like she is trying to judge whether I am telling the truth.

‘Carol didn’t tell you that I called?’

‘No, I swear.’ ’Um so relieved I laugh.

In that second, it hits me just how much, I have missed Hana. Even when she is mad at me, she is the only person who is ever really looked out for me by choice, not because of family obligation, duty, and responsibility and all the other stuff that…

Everyone else in my life- mom and all my cousins, the other girls at St. Anne's, even Rachel- like- have only spent time with me because they had to.

‘I had no idea.’ Hanna does not laugh, though. She frowns. ‘No worries. It’s no grandiose thing to me.’

‘Listen, Hanna-’

She cuts me off. ‘As I said, it’s no big deal.’ She crosses her arms and shrugs. I do not know whether she believes me or not, but things are different. This is not going to be some big, happy reunion.

‘So, you got matched?’

Her voice is polite now, and slightly formal, so I take on the same tone.

‘Brian Scharff. I accepted. You?’ She nods… A muscle flexes at the corner of her mouth, almost imperceptible.

Me- her- them- ‘Hargrove?’

‘Wow. Congratulations.’ I cannot help sounding impressed. Hanna must have killed at the evaluations. Not that that is any surprise.

‘Yeah. Lucky me.’ Hanna’s voice is completely toneless. I cannot

tell if she is being sarcastic. Nevertheless, she is lucky, whether she knows it or not.

And there it is: Even though we are standing in the same patch of sun-drenched pavement, we might as well be a hundred thousand miles apart. You came from different stars, and you will come to different ends: That is an old saying, something she used to repeat a-lot. I never really understood how true it was until now.

This must be why Carol did not tell me Hana called. Three phone calls

are a- lot of phone calls to forget, and Carol is careful about stuff like that. She was trying to hurry up the inevitable, skip us both to the ending, the part where Hanna and I are not friends anymore.

She knows that after the procedure-once the past and all our shared history has loosened its grip on us, once we do not feel our memories so much, we will not have anything in common anymore.

Hanna- Kellie was trying to protect me, in her way.

There is no point in confronting her about it. Feelings are not forever. Time waits for no man, but progress waits for the man to enact it. ‘You are walking home, right?’ Hana is still looking at me like I am a stranger. ‘Yeah,’ I say. I gesture to my T-shirt.

‘I figured I should probably get inside before I blind someone with this.’ A flit over Hana’s face. ‘I’ll walk with you,’ she says, which surprises me. For a while, we walk in silence.

We are not that far from my house, and I am worried we will go the

whole way back without speaking at all. I have never seen Hana so quiet, and it is making me nervous. ‘Where are you coming from?’ I say, just to say something. Hana starts next to me, as though I have woken her from a dream.

‘East End,’ she says. ‘I’m on a strict tanning schedule.’ She presses her arm next to mine. It is at least seven shades darker than mine, which is still pale, a little more freckled than it is in the winter. ‘Not you, huh?’ This time she smiles for real.

‘Um, no. Haven’t gotten down to the beach very much.’ I will away a blush. Thankfully, Hana does not notice, or if she does, she does not say anything. ‘I know. I was looking for you.’

‘You where?’ I gave her a look from the corner of my eye.

She rolls her eyes at me. I am glad to see her attitude is coming back operational. ‘I mean, not enthusiastically. But I have been down there a few times, yes. Haven’t seen you- enough.’

‘I’ve been working a lot,’ I say. I do not add, to avoid East End.

‘You still running?’

‘No. Too hot.’ ‘Yeah, me too. Figured I’d give it a rest until fall.’ We walk a few more paces in silence and then Hana squints at me, tilting her head. ‘So, what else?’ Her question catches me off guard.

‘What do you mean, what else?’

‘That is what I mean. I mean, what else? Come on, Lena. It is the last summer, remember? The last summer

of no responsibilities and all that good stuff. So, what have you been doing?

Where have you been?'

'I- nothing... I haven't done anything.'

This was the whole point-to stay out of trouble, to do as little as possible-but saying the words makes me feel sad. The summer seems to be ending so-o rapidly, shrinking down to a fine point before I have even had a chance to enjoy it. It is already August.

We will have another five weeks of this weather before the wind starts cutting in at night and the leaves get trimmed with edges of gold. ‘What about you?’ I say… ‘Good summer so far?’

‘Why? It’s not like you’ll even have a budget.’ I do not mean to sound bitter but there it is, the difference in our futures cutting between us again. We go silent after that. Hanna looks away, squinting slightly against the sunlight.

Part: 3

I am just feeling depressed about how quickly the summer is cycling by, but memories start coming thick and fast, like a deck of cards being reshuffled in my head: Hana swinging open the bathroom door that first day in second grade, folding her arms as she blurted out, Is it because of your mom?

Staying up past midnight one of the few times we were ever allowed to have a sleepover, giggling, and imagining amazing and impossible people for our matches someday, like

the president of the United States or the stars of our favorite movies; running side by side, legs beating in tandem on the pavement, like the rhythm of a single heartbeat; bodysurfing at the beach and buying triple cones of ice cream on the way home, arguing about whether vanilla or chocolate was better.

‘The usual.’

Hana shrugs… ‘I’ve been going to the beach a lot as I said. Been babysitting for the Farrels some.’

‘Really?’ I wrinkle my nose. Hana’s always had a thing against children.

She is always staying they are too sticky and clingy, like Kellie that has been left too long in a hot pocket.

She makes a face. ‘Yeah, unfortunately. My parents decided I needed to ‘practice managing a household,’ or some crap like that. Do you know they are making me work out a budget? Like figuring out how to spend sixty dollars a week is going to

teach me about paying bills, or responsibility or something.’

Best friends, for more than ten years and in the end, it all comes down to the edge of a scalpel, to the motion of a laser beam through the brain and a flashing surgical knife. All that history and its importance get detached, floats away like a severed balloon. In two years in two months- Hanna and I will pass each other on the streets with nothing more than a nod-different people, different worlds, two stars

revolving silently, separated by thousands of miles of dark space.

Segregation has it all wrong. We should be protected from the people who will leave us in the end, from all the persons who will disappear or forget us.

Hanna’s feeling nostalgic too because she suddenly comes out with, ‘Remember all our plans for this summer? All the things we said we’d finally do?’

I do not even skip a beat. ‘Break into the Spencer Prep pool-’

‘-and go swimming in our underwear,’ I- Hanna finishes. I crack a smile. ‘Hop the fence at Cherryville Farms-’ ‘-and eat the maple syrup straight out of the barrels.’

‘Run from the Hill to the old airport.’

‘Ride our bikes down Suicide Point.’

‘Try and find that rope swing Sarah Miller told us about. The one above Fore River.’

‘Sneak into the movie theater and see four movies back-to-back.’

‘Finish off the Pixey Sundae at Maeie’s.’ I am fully smiling now, and Hanna is too. I start quoting, ‘‘A huge sundae for enormous appetites only, featuring thirteen scoops, whipped cream, hot fudge-’’ Hanna jumps in, ‘‘And all the toppings your little monsters can handle!’’

Both of us laugh. We have read that sign a thousand times. We have been debating making a second attack on the Hobgoblin since fourth grade:

That is when we tried the first time. Hanna insisted on going there for her birthday and took me along. Both of us spent the rest of the night rolling around on the floor of her bathroom, and we had only made it through seven of the thirteen scoops.

Part: 4

Hanna- We have reached my street. A few kids are playing in the middle of the road. It is a makeshift game of soccer: They are kicking a can around and shouting, bodies brown and shiny with sweat. I see Kellie among

them. As I am watching, a girl tries to elbow her out of the way, and she turns around and pushes her to the ground.

The younger girl starts to wail. No one comes out of any of the houses, even as the girl's voice crescendos to a high-pitched scream, like a siren going off. A curtain or a- dish towel flutters in a window: Other than that, the street is silent, motionless.

Kellie- I am desperate to keep riding the wave of good feeling, to fix things between Hana and me, even if it is only for a month. 'Listen, Hanna'-I

feel like I’m working the words past a massive lump in my throat; I’m almost as nervous as I was before the evaluations- ‘they’re playing The Defective Detective in the park tonight. Double feature, with her. We could go if you want.’ The Defective Detective is this film franchise Hanna and I used to love when we were little, about a famous detective who is incompetent, and his dog sidekick: The dog always ends up solving the crimes.

A lot of actors have played the lead role, but our favorite was she.

Hanna- When we were kids, we used to pray to get matched with him and her.

Kellie- ‘Tonight?’ Hana’s smile falters, and my stomach sinks. Stupid, stupid, I think.

It does not matter anyway.

‘It’s okay if you can’t. No worries.

Just an idea,’ I say quickly, looking away so she won’t see how disappointed I am.

‘No-I mean, I want to, but-’ Hana sucks in a breath. I hate this, hate how awkward we both are. ‘I kind of have this party’-she corrects herself speedily- ‘this thing I’m supposed to go to with her.

My stomach gets that hollowed out feeling. It is amazing how words can do that, just shred your insides apart. Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me- such bullshit.

‘Since when do you spend time together with her?’

Again, I am not trying to sound bitter, but I realize I sound like someone's whiny little sister, complaining about being left out of a game. I bite my lip and turn away, furious with myself.

'She's not that bad.'

Part: 5

Kellie- Hanna says mildly. I can hear it in her voice; she feels sorry for me. This is worse than anything. I almost wish we were screaming at each other again like we did the day at her house-even that would be better than

her careful tone of voice, the way we are dancing around each other's feelings. 'She's not stuck-up. Just shy, I guess.'

Angelica Marston was a junior last year. Hana made fun of her for the way she wore her uniform. It was always perfectly pressed and spotless, the collar of her button-down turned down exactly, her skirt hitting exactly at the knee.

Hana said Angelica Marston had a stick up her butt because her father was a big scientist at the labs.

And she did walk that way, all constipated and careful.

‘You used to hate her,’ I squeak out.

My words do not seem to be asking my brain for permission before popping out of my mouth.

‘I didn’t hate her,’ Hana says like she is trying to explain algebra to a two-year-old. ‘I didn’t know her. I always thought she was a bitch; you know?

Because of her clothes. But that is all her parents. They're super strict, really protective.' Hana shakes her head. 'She's not like that at all. She is- well different...'

That word seems to vibrate in the air for a second: different. For a second, I have an image of Hanna and Kellie, arms linked, trying not to laugh, sneaking through the streets after curfew: Angelica was fearless, beautiful, and fun, just like Hana. I push the image out of my head.

Down the street, one of the kids kicks the can, hard. It skitters between two dented grey garbage cans, that have been set out in the road, a makeshift goal. Half of the children start jumping up and down, pumping their fists; the others, Jenny included, gesticulate and shrieks something about off-sides.

It occurs to me for the first time how ugly my street must look to Hana, all the houses squished together, half of them missing windowpanes,

porches sagging in the middle like old beaten-down mattresses.

It is so different from the clean, quiet streets in West End, from the silent, gleaming cars and the gates and the green hedges.

'You could come tonight,' Hanna says quietly.

A rush of hatred overwhelms me. Hatred for my life, for its narrowness and cramped spaces; hatred for Kellie, with her secretive smile and rich parents; hatred for Hanna, for being so stupid, careless,

and stubborn, primarily, and for leaving me behind before, I was ready to be left; and underneath all those layers else, too, some white-hot blade of unhappiness flashing in the very deepest part of me. I cannot name it or even focus on it clearly, but somehow, I understand that this- that other thing- makes me the angriest of all.

‘Thanks for the invitation,’ I say, not even bothering to keep the sarcasm out of my voice. ‘Sounds like a blast. Will there be boys there too?’

Either Hanna does not notice the tone of my voice-which is, doubtful-or she chooses to ignore it. ‘That’s kind of the whole point,’ she says, deadpan. ‘Well, and the music.’

‘Music?’ I speak. I cannot help but sound interested. ‘Like the last time?’ Hana’s face lights up. ‘Yeah. I mean, no. Different band. But these guys are supposed to be amazing-even better than last time.’ She pauses, then repeats quietly, ‘You could come with us.’

Despite everything, this gives me pause. In the days after the party at Roaring Brook Farms, snatches of music followed me everywhere: I heard it winging in and out of the wind, I heard it singing off the ocean and moaning through the walls of the house.

Sometimes, I woke up in the middle of the night, drenched in sweat, my heart pounding, with the notes sounding in my ears. But every time I was awake and trying to remember the

melodies consciously, hum a few notes or recall any of the chords, I could not.

Hanna’s staring at me hopefully, waiting for my response. For a second, I feel bad for her. I want to make her happy, like I always did, want to see her give a whoop and put her fist in the air and flash me one of her well-known smiles.

But then I remember she has Kellie now, and something hardens in my throat, and significant that I am going to disappoint her gives me a dull satisfaction.

‘I think I’ll pass,’ I say. ‘But thanks anyway.’

Hana shrugs, and I can tell she is fighting to look like it is no big deal. ‘If you change your mind-’ She tries to smile but cannot keep it up for longer than a second. Deering Highlands… You know where to find me.’ Deering Highlands.

Of course…

The Highlands is an abandoned subdivision off-peninsula. A decade ago, the government discovered sympathizers- and, if the rumors are

true, even some Invalids- living together in one of the big mansions out there. It was a huge scandal, and the bust the result of a yearlong sting operation.

When all was said and done, forty-two people had been executed and another hundred thrown in the Vaults. Since then, Deering Highlands has been a ghost town: avoided, forgotten, condemned.

‘Yeah, well. You know where to find me.’ I gesture lamely down the street.

‘Yeah.’ Hanna looks down at her feet, hops from one to the other. There is nothing else to say, but I cannot stand to turn around, and just walk away. I have a terrible feeling this is the last time I will see Hanna before we are cured.

Part: 6

Fear-

seizes me all at once, and I wish I could backpedal through our conversation, take back all the sarcastic or mean things that I said, tell

her I miss her, and I want to be best friends again.

But just when I am about to blurt this out, she gives me a quick wave and says, ‘Okay, then. See you around,’ and the moment collapses in on itself and with it, my chance to speak.

‘Okay. See you.’

Hanna starts down the road. I am tempted to watch her go. I get the urge to memorize her walk-to imprint her in my brain somehow, just as she is but as I am watching her waver in and

out of the fierce sunlight, her silhouette gets confused with another one in my head, a shadow weaving in and out of darkness, about to walk off the cliff, and I do not know whom I am looking at anymore.

Suddenly the edges of the world are blurring and there is a sharp pain in my throat, so I turn around and walk quickly toward the house.

‘Liv!’ She calls out to me, just before I reach the gate.

I spin around, heart leaping, thinking she will be the one to say it. I miss you. Let us go back.

In the years before the cure was perfected, it was offered on a trial basis only. The risks attached to it were great. At the time one out of every hundred patients suffered a fatal loss of brain function after the procedure.

Unfluctuating from fifty feet, I can see Hanna hesitating. Then she makes this fluttering gesture with her hand and calls out, ‘Never- mind.’ This time when she turns around, she does

not waver. She walks straight and speedily, turns a corner, and is gone.

But what did I expect?

That is the whole point, after all:

There is no going back.

And if there were people who died on the operating table, they died for a compelling cause, and no one can lament them- Nonetheless, people swarmed the hospitals in record number, demanding to be cured; they camped outside the laboratories for

days at a time, hoping to secure a procedural slot.

These years are also known as the Miracle Years since the number of lives that were healed and made whole, and the number of souls brought out of sickness.

Part: 7

Hanna- Her face is red, and she is sweating big-time. Dark swaths of sweat have left pit stains on her pale blue blouse, navy crescents.

‘Better get changed,’ she says.

‘Rachel and Deved will be here any second.’

‘She’s grown up now,’ she told me when I asked her… why? Why Rachel- did not like to play anymore. ‘Someday you’ll see.’ After that, I stopped paying attention to the notation that appeared every few months on the kitchen wall calendar: ER to visit. At dinner, the big topics of conversation are Brian Scharff- Rachel’s husband, David, works with Brian’s cousin’s friend, so David feels like he is an expert on the family-and

Moon of Pittsburgh, where I will be starting in the fall. It is the first time in my life I will be in class with members of the opposite sex, but Rachel tells me not to worry.

I would completely have forgotten my sister, and her husband; was coming over for dinner. Normally- like I see Rachel four or five times a year, tops. When I was younger, especially after Rachel had first moved out of her house, I used to count the days until she would see me.

I do not think I fully understood then about the procedure and what it meant for her- for me- for us. I knew that she had been saved from Thomas and the disease, but that was it. I thought that otherwise, things would be the same.

I thought that as soon as she came to see me it would be like old times again, that we would bust out our socks to have a dance party, or she would pull me onto her lap and start braiding my hair, launch into one of her

stories of distant places and witches who could change into animals.

But then again, she only skimmed a hand over my head as she came through the door and applauded politely when Carol made me recite my multiplication and division tables.

‘You won’t even notice,’ she says.

‘You’ll be so busy with work and study.’

‘There are safeguards,’ says she. ‘All the students are vetted.’

Code for: All the students are cured.

I think of Kellie and almost say, not all of them.

Dinner drags on well past curfew. By the time my aunt helps me clear the plates, it is eleven o’clock, and still, Rachel and her husband make no sign to leave. That is another thing I am excited about: In thirty-six days, I do not like- must worry about curfew anymore.

After dinner, my uncle and David go out onto the porch. She has

brought two cigars- cheap ones, but still- and the smell of the smoke, sweet and spicy and just a little bit oily- float in through the windows, intermingles with the sound of their voices, fills the house with a blue-like haze.

Rachel and Hanna stay in the dining room, drinking cups of watered-down boiled coffee, the dirty pale color of old dishwater.

From upstairs, I hear scampering feet. Kellie will tease her until she is bored, until she climbs into bed, sour and dissatisfied, letting the

dullness and sameness of another day lull her to sleep.

I wash the dishes-many more of them than usual since Carol insisted on having a soup (hot carrot, which we all choked down, sweating) and a pot roast slathered in garlic and limp asparagus, rescued from the very bottom of the vegetable bin, and some stale cookies.

Part: 8

I am full, and the warmth of the dishwater on my wrists and elbows-plus the familiar rhythms of conversation, the pitter-patter of feet

upstairs, the heavy blue smoke-make me feel very sleepy. Kellie has finally remembered to ask about Rachel's children; Rachel goes over their accomplishments as though reciting a list she has only memorized recently, and with difficulty- Sara is reading already; Hanna said her first word at only thirteen months, to Rachel now part of Ray's fuck body party.

'Raid, raid… this is a raid. Please do as you are commanded and do not try and resist.'

The voice booming from outside makes me jump. Rachel and Hanna have paused momentarily in their conversation, are listening to the commotion in the street. I cannot hear David and Uncle, either. Even this girl and she have stopped fooling around upstairs.

There is no more knocking on the walls and to girls sighing. Patchy interference from the street; the sounds of hundreds and hundreds of boots, clicking away in time; and that awful voice, amplified by a bullhorn: ‘This is a

raid. Attention, this is a raid. Please be ready with your identification papers.'

A raid night. Instantly I think of Hanna and the party. The room starts spinning. I reached out, grabbing onto the counter.

'Seems pretty early for a raid,' she says mildly from the dining room. 'We had one just a few months ago, I think.'

'February seventeenth,' Rachel says…'

I remember…

Our lips are so wet-

Chapter: 130

Rachel

Part: 1

Rachel- We stood in the snow for half an hour before we could be verified. Afterward, Hanna had pneumonia for two weeks.’ She relates this story as though she is chatting about some minor inconvenience at the Laundromat like she is erroneous a sock.

My name is Rachel Anderson, my gram would be Lily.

‘Has it been that long?’ Hanna shrugs take a sip of her coffee.

The voices, the feet, the static- it is all coming closer. The raiding parties move as one, from house to house- sometimes hitting every house on a street, sometimes skipping whole blocks, sometimes going every other. It is random. Or at least, it is supposed to be random. The houses always get targeted more than others.

But even if you are not on a watch list you can end up standing in the snow, like Rachel and her husband, while the regulators and police try to prove your rationality. Otherwise- even worse- while the raiders come inside your house, tear the walls down, and look for signs of suspicious activity. Isolated property laws are suspended on raid nights. Every law is adjourned on raid nights.

We've all heard horror stories: pregnant women stripped down and probed in front of everybody, people

thrown in jail for two or three years just for looking at a police officer incorrectly, or for trying to prevent a supervisor from entering a certain room.

Part: 2

‘This is a raid. If you are asked to step out of the house, please make sure you have all your identification papers in hand, including the papers of any children over the age of six months.

Anyone who resists will be detained and questioned. Anyone who

delays will be charged with obstruction.’

At the end of the street. Then a few houses away. Then two houses away. No, the next door over. I hear the Rake’s’ mother fucking dog start barking furiously.

Then Mrs. Cumshot, apologizing, yet not enough.

More barking-then someone (a regulator?) mutters something, and I hear a few heavy thuds and a whimper, then someone else saying, ‘You don’t have to kill the damn thing,’ and

someone else saying, ‘Why not? Probably has fleas, anyway.’

Then for a while, there is quiet: just the occasional crackle of walkie-talkies, someone reciting identification numbers into a phone, the shuffling of papers.

Then: ‘All right, then. You’re in the clear.’ And the boots start up again.

For all their nonchalance, even Rachel and I tense up as the boots clomp by our house. I can see Hanna gripping her coffee cup tightly, knuckles white. My heart is jumping

and skipping, a grasshopper in my chest. But the boots pass us by.

~*~

Rachel heaves out a perceptible sigh of relief as we hear the regulators pound on a door farther down the street. ‘Open up… this is a raid.’

I have a- teacup rattles in its saucer, making me jump. ‘Silly, isn’t it?’ She says, forcing a laugh. ‘Even when you haven’t done anything wrong, it still makes you jumpy.’ Jenny is my banished angel, that I need to have

faith within, she makes me come for her.

I feel a dull pain in my hand and realize I am still holding on to the counter as though it is going to save my life. I cannot relax, cannot calm down, even as the sounds of the footsteps grow fainter, the bullhorn voice increasingly distorted until it is completely unintelligible.

All I can picture are the raiding parties- sometimes as many as fifty in a single night-swirling around Pitt., swarming it, surrounding it like water

cascading around a whirlpool, sweeping up anyone and everyone they can find and accused of misbehavior or disobedience, and even people they cannot.

Somewhere out there Hanna is dancing, spinning, blond hair fanning out behind her, smiling-while around her boys are pressing close and unapproved music pumps through the speakers.

I fight a feeling of incredible nausea. I do not even want to think

about what will happen to her to all of them if they are caught.

All I can do is hope she has not made it to the party yet. She took too long to get ready-it seems possible, Hana’s always late-and was still at home when the raids started. Even Hanna would never venture outside during raids. It is suicide.

But I and everyone else - Every single person there - Everyone who just wanted to hear some music - I think about what Hanna said the night I ran

into him at Brooke Farms: I came to hear the music, like everybody else.

I will the image out of my mind and tell myself it is not my problem. I should be happy if the party is raided and everyone there is in trouble. What they are doing is dangerous, not just for them but for all of us: That is how the disease gets in. But the beneath part of me, the stubborn part that said gray at my first evaluation, keeps tenacious and nagging at me. So, what? It speaks.

So, they wanted to hear some music. Some real music- not the dinky little songs that get trotted out at the Pitt Concert Series, all boring rhythms, and bright, chipper notes.

They are not doing anything that bad.

Then I remember the other thing Hanna said: Nobody’s hurting anybody.

Besides, there is always the possibility that Hanna did not run late tonight, and she is out there, oblivious, as the raids circle closer and closer.

Myself- Rachel, must squeeze my eyes shut against the thought and the thought of lots of glittering blades descendant on her. If she is not thrown in jail, she will be carted directly to the labs-she will be cured before dawn, regardless of the dangers or risks.

Somehow, despite my racing thoughts and the circumstance that the room continues its frantic spinning, I have been able to clean all the dishes. I have also come to a decision.

I must go. I must warn her.

I must warn all of them.

By the time Rachel and I leave and all and sundry are settled in bed it is midnight.

Every second that passes feels like agony. I can only hope the door-to-door on the peninsula is taking longer than usual, and it will be a while before the raiders make it to the Laurel Highlands. They have decided to skip the Highlands altogether. Given the fact that many of the houses up there are vacant, it is always a possibility. Still, since Highlands used to be the

hotbed of resistance in Pitt., it seems doubtful.

I slip out of bed, not bothering to change out of my sleep pants and T-shirt, both of which are black. Then I put on black flats, and even though it is about a thousand degrees, pull a black ski hat out of the closet. Cannot be too careful tonight.

Just as I am about to crack open the bedroom door, I hear a small noise behind me, like the mewing of a cat. I whip around. She is sitting up in

bed, watching me, all naked dancing for her.

Do you like what you see? Yes, suck on me!

Okay and she did. I got a successful conclusion!

~*~

Hanna- tips for eating a girl like Kellie or Rachel.

Hanna- Aha! You are in luck, my friend. I will tell you how to perform the best oral sex. She will come in less than two minutes if you do this right.

First, there is the normal way to do it as described by my friends here. Teasing, lacking, introducing your tongue. All that is great, she will love that, but she will love this even more.

STARTING-

Well, you must start the normal way, as described above. Go down there and lick the clitoris. (If you do not know where or what the clitoris is, I recommend you look it up on google and look at several pictures.)

Also, another tip for the regular oral sex is that you get your

mouth closed like you are French kissing it, not like in porn where they just use the flapping tongue at a distance. They do that, so you can see her business.

GETTING DOWN TO IT-

Ok, now, after 2 or 3 minutes of regular oral sex, this is what you are going to do. tighten your cheeks and lips and blow (note that if you do not tighten, the effect will be a motorboat, you do not want that,) this will make your lips vibrate fast. Practice this by yourself first, then apply that to her clit

and she will love it. I could not find any videos of grownups doing this, but babies do it all the time, here is a video of a baby doing something like what I explained.

First off, do whatever you can to get her turned on. Every girl is different, try making out, humping her, sexually removing her clothes, take off your clothes get hot and wet, whatever it takes. If her clothes are not removed, take them off. Do not have light in the room. Try to have it as dark as possible because it will relax the girl more.

Do not finger her right away, just place your hand or fingers on her pussy and rub it and play around with it, do this with her laying down and you sitting up. Look at her to see her response. Then you can start to finger her, start slowing with one finger, then add the second one, or third or fourth... however many you can. The more fingers, the better it feels.

Then go faster and faster. Get her moaning and sighing. THEN: PUT AS MANY FINGERS AS POSSIBLE IN AS FAR AS THEY WILL GO! AND PUT

YOUR THUMB ON THE TOP OF HER PUSSY AND MASSAGE IT.

THAT WILL DRIVE HER WILD. GET HER TURNED ON.

If she has no clothing on, take the come from your fingers and massage her boobs, and spread it all over her stomach while she relaxes. If you want, stick your fingers in her mouth so she will lick them or suck them clean. Then, get down and start eating her out. Start by licking the outside of it and then use your fingers to open it up and get your tongue in as

far as you can. Move it around fast, if she comes, lick it up. Ignore the smell, of course, it is not going to be good, ignore it though, just think about how good you are making her feel.

Kellie- TIPS:

Make sure you get enough air before you start doing this. Let the air go steadily but slowly so you can last longer in one breath.

While you get more air, suck in so down on her.

Do not blow air into her vagina, do this at the clitoris.

When you practice this by yourself, it will be and sound different than when you do it. When you perform this on her, there will be a bunch of fluids and saliva flying everywhere because of the blowing and it will sound kind of like you are blowing on her tummy, which may sound funny and silly... but believe you- me, if she starts laughing, she will not laugh for more than three seconds, then her face will change to that of a pleasured woman.

1. What is that smell nothing if she is clean about it? It tests like skin, so yes. While some folks prefer their poontang to be on the gamey side, for many people, fear of a funky odor or taste is the chief barrier to going down on a woman. All women do have a distinctive scent and flavor, and for some would-be cunning linguists, these may be an acquired taste.

2. However, if your partner is clean and in good health, her taste and smell should not be unpleasant or overwhelming. If you have concerns

about her hygiene, the most tactful approach is to suggest a shared shower or bath before sex. If after a good soaping, her pussy still smells like something crawled up it and died, or she has an unusual discharge, she has an infection and should see a doctor.

3. Work your way up.

Take your time when you start to eat pussy. Get her warmed up with some basic foreplay- kissing, fondling, etc. It is better to go down on a wet pussy than a dry one.

Once she is aroused, make your descent. Try kissing and tonguing her ankle or the sole of her foot. Then kiss and lick your way slowly up the inside of her leg (the back of the knee is a good erogenous zone, too). Tease her a bit more by kissing and tonguing her inner thighs. Blow some air lightly over her clit and opening. She will go nuts.

4. Get acquainted.

Once your face is up in her crotch, do not dive straight for her panic button. Explore the whole area

with your mouth. Gently probe with your tongue and locate her vagina and clit. Suck on her labia. Get your whole face messy.

5. Get busy.

Now you want to go to work on her clit. The key is to use your tongue and lips to suck and massage it gently. Do not poke at it or press too hard. Go in circles, go up and down, flick back and forth lightly. There is no real ‘right’ way to go down on a woman; just make it up as you go along and pay attention

to what works. Vary your speed and pressure and see what she responds to.

When you hit the right groove, you will know it because she will grab the back of your head and clamp her thighs around your ears like a vice. But to be on the safe side, ask her beforehand to let you know what she likes. Once you hit her hot spot, there is no need to rush; just keep her engine revving. Feel free to explore some other techniques or positions before you take her over the top.

Rachel- TIPS

1. ABC’s.

This is the most common tip when you eat pussy: use your tongue to trace the letters of the alphabet on her clit. Some people swear by it. I do not recommend it. I do not think it is a good technique. Also, it is too much of a distraction, and if she catches you humming the Alphabet Song under your breath, you are in trouble. You should be paying attention to her, not what comes after Q.

2. Use your hands.

You can create some wild sensations for her by stimulating her clit with both your fingers and your tongue simultaneously. Also, most women enjoy a finger or two in their PUSSY while being eaten out. Insert your fingers with your palm up, crook them slightly, and stroke toward you in a ‘come hither’ motion to hit her G-spot. A finger up the CLIT will also drive her over the edge if she is into anal play. (As always, to avoid infection, if you put something in her ASS, make sure you do not put it in her pussy or

mouth afterward.) You can if she wants but asks.

3. Stick out your tongue.

You can also use your tongue to penetrate her- just make it rigid and plunge in. You can then tongue- CLIT, and PUSSY and kiss her by moving your tongue in and out, or by keeping it stationary and bobbing your whole head. For bonus points, try stimulating her clit with your nose while your tongue is inside her.

4. Let her ride.

Put a pillow or two under your neck and let her sit on your face. This gives you a pleasant view of her PUSSY and junk and gives her a degree of control over pressure and position. Let her grind her juices all over your mug.

Um…

Part: 3

#- Lez-bo’s! Maddie and Olivia

Rachel- Boys balls are hairy- and gross not tasty at all to me.

For a second, we just stare at each other. If Kellie makes a noise, or

gets out of bed, or does anything, she is bound to wake Hanna, and then I am done to make a baby, finished, kaput. I am trying to think of what I can say to reassure her, trying to fabricate a lie, but then, the miracle of miracles, she just lies back down in bed and closes her eyes. And even though it is very dark, I would swear that there is the smallest smile on her face.

I feel a quick rush of relief. One good thing about the fact that Gracie refuses to speak. I know she will not tell me. I slip out into the street without

any other problems, even remembering to skip the third-to-last stair, which last time let out such an awful squeak, I thought for sure Hanna and the teenage girls wake up all in the same bad.

Lying side by side ass naked.

After the noise and the commotion of the raids, the street is freakily still and quiet. Every single window is dark, all the blinds drawn, like the houses are trying to turn away from the street or put up their shoulders against prying eyes.

Almost…

The Raiders have moved on.

I start quickly in the direction of the Highlands. I am too afraid to take my bike. I am worried the little reflective patch on the wheels will attract too much attention.

I cannot think about what I am doing, I cannot think about the consequences if I am caught. A stray piece of red paper sweeps by me, turning on the wind like the tumbleweed you see in old cowboy movies.

I recognize it as a raider's notice, a proclamation filled with impossible- to pronounce words explaining the legality of suspending everyone's rights for the evening. Other than that, it could be any other night- any other quiet, dead, ordinary night.

Excluding that on the wind, just faintly, you can hear the distant murmur of footsteps, and a high wail as if someone is crying. The sounds are so quiet you might almost mistake them for ocean and wind sounds.

I do not know where I even got this rush of resolution. I would never have thought I would have the courage to leave the house on a raid night, not in a million years.

Hanna was wrong about me. I am not scared all the time. I am passing a black trash bag heaped on the sidewalk when a low whimper stops me short. I spin around, my whole body on high alert in an instant. Nothing. The sound is repeated: an eerie, crooning sound that makes the hair on my arms

stand up. Then the garbage bag by my feet shakes itself.

No. Not a garbage bag. It’s Riley, the Next door’ black yappy f*cking ass and a 2 by 4 in it- a mutt.

I take a few shaky steps toward him. I need only one glance to know that he is dying. He is completely coated with a sticky, shiny, black substance-blood, I realize as I get closer.

That is the reason I mistook his fur, in the dark, for the slick black surface of a plastic bag. One of his eyes

is pressed to the pavement; the other is open. His head has been clubbed in.

Blood is flowing freely from his nose, black and viscous. I think of the voice I heard- has fleas, anyway, the regulator said- and the swift thudding sound that followed.

Hanna is staring at me with a look so mournful and accusatory I swear for a second it is like he is a human and he is trying to tell me something trying to say, you did this to me. A wave of nausea overtakes me, and I am tempted to get down on my

knees and scoop him up in my arms, or strip off my clothes and start soaking the blood off him. But at the same time, I feel paralyzed. I cannot move.

As I am standing there, frozen, he gives a long, shuddering jerk, from the tip of his tail to his nose. Then he goes still. Instantly my arms and legs unfreeze.

Part: 4

I- Rachel stumble backward, bile pushing itself up into my mouth. I career in a full circle, feeling like I did the day I got drunk with Hana, out of

control of my own body. Anger and disgust are shredding through me, making me want to scream. I find a flattened cardboard box sitting behind a dumpster and drag it over to Kellie’s body, covering her completely. I try not to think of the insects that will tear into him by morning. I am surprised to feel tears prick at my eyes. I wipe them away with the back of my arm. But as I start toward Deering all I can think is, I am sorry, I am sorry, I am sorry, like a mantra, or a prayer.

One good thing about raids: They are loud. All I must do is pause in the shadows and listen for the footsteps, the static, the freaking harsh voices. I switch directions, choose the side streets, the ones that have been skipped over or raided already. The people who live in these houses have been identified as troublemakers or resisters. The burning wind whistling through the streets carries sounds of yelling and crying, dogs barking.

Kellie- I do my best not to think about

Hanna.

Part: 5

#- She was embarrassed when she did this for the first time- normal!

Rachel- Evidence of the raids is everywhere: overturned garbage cans and Dumpsters, trash picked through and spilled out onto the street, mountains of old receipts and shredded letters and rotting vegetables and foul-smelling goop I do not even want to identify, red notices coating everything like a speck of dust. My shoes get slick from clomping over it, and in the worst

places, I must keep my arms out like a tightrope walker just to stay on my feet. I pass a few houses marked with a big X, black paint splashed across their walls and windows like a black gash, and my stomach sinks.

I stick to the shadows, slipping in and out of alleys and darting from one Dumpster to the next. Sweat is pooling at the base of my neck and under my arms, and it is not just from the heat. Everything looks strange, grotesque, and distorted, certain streets glittering with glass from

smashed windows, the smell of burning in the air. At one point, I come around a corner onto Forest Avenue just as a group of regulators turns onto it from the other end. I whip back around, pressing flat against the wall of a hardware store and inching back in the direction I have come.

The chances any of the regulators saw me are slim- I was a block away and its pitch-black-but still, my heart never goes back to its normal pace. I feel like I am playing some giant

video game or trying to solve a complicated math equation.

One girl is trying to avoid forty raiding parties of between fifteen to twenty people each, spread out across a radius of seven miles. If she must make it 2.8 miles through the center, what is the probability she will wake up tomorrow morning in a jail cell?

~*~

Before the shakedown, Deering

Highlands was a nicer part of Pittsburgh.

The houses were big and new-at least For Hanna, which means they were built within the past hundred years-and set back behind gates and hedges, on streets with names like Kellie and the other girl.

Road… There are a few families still clinging on in some of the houses, dirt-poor ones who cannot afford to move anywhere else, or have not gotten permission for a new residence, but it is empty. Nobody wanted to stay on; nobody wanted to be associated with the resistance.

The weirdest thing about Deering Highlands is how quickly it was abandoned. There are still rusting toys scattered among the grass and cars parked in some of the driveways, though most of them have been picked apart, cleaned of metal, and malleable like corpses scavenged by enormous buzzards.

The whole area has the forlorn look of an abandoned animal: houses drooping slowly into the overgrown lawns.

Normally, I get freaked out just being in the vicinity of the Highlands. A- a lot of people say it is bad luck, like passing a graveyard without holding your breath.

But tonight, when I finally make it there, I feel like I could dance a jig on the sidewalk. Everything is dark, quiet, and undisturbed, not a single raider's notice to be seen, not a whisper of conversation or the brush of a heel on a sidewalk. The Raiders have not come yet.

They will not come at all. I speed quickly through the streets, picking up the pace now that I do not have to worry so much about sticking to the shadows and moving soundlessly. Highlands is big, a maze of winding streets that all look weirdly similar, houses looming out of the darkness like ships run aground. The lawns have all gone wild over the years, trees stretching their gnarled branches to the sky and casting crazy zigzag shadows on the moonlit pavement.

I get lost in Hanna- ah- way- somehow, I manage to make a complete circle and wind up hitting the same intersection twice-but when I turn onto jumble desolate lane, I see a dull light burning dimly in the distance, behind a knotted mass of trees, and I know I have found the place.

An old mailbox is staked crookedly in the ground next to the driveway. A black X is still faintly visible on one of its sides.

Part: 6

I can see why they have chosen this house for the party. It is set back far from the road and surrounded by trees so dense I cannot help but think of the dark and whispering woods on the far side of the border. Walking up the driveway is creepy. I keep my eyes focused on the fuzzy pale light of the house, which expands and brightens slowly as I get closer, eventually resolving into two lit windows.

The windows have been covered with fabric, to hide the fact that there are people inside. It is not

working. I can see shadow-people moving back and forth inside the house. The music is incredibly quiet. It is not until I make it onto the porch that I hear it at all-faint, muffled strains that seem to vibrate up from the floorboards. There must be a basement.

I have been rushing to arrive, but I hesitate with my hand on the front door, my palm slick with sweat. I have not given much thought to how I will get everyone out. If I just start screaming about a raid it will cause a panic. Everyone will stream into the

streets at once, and then the chances of getting home undetected go to zero. Someone will hear something; the raiders will catch on, and then we will all be screwed.

I do a mental correction. They will be screwed. I am not like these people on the other side of the door. I am not them. But then I think of Hanna trembling, going limp. I am not those people either, the ones who did that, the ones who watched. Even the next door over did not bother trying to save him, their dog.

They did not even cover him up as he was dying.

I would never do that. Never - ever. Not even if I had a million procedures. He was alive. He had a heartbeat and blood and breath, and they left him there like trash.

Me- Us- We- Them- and They. The words ricochet in my head. I rub my palm and my hands on the back of my pants and open the door.

~*~

Rachel- said this party would be smaller, but to me, it seems even more crowded than the last one, maybe because the rooms are tiny and packed.

They are filled with a choking curtain of cigarette smoke, which shimmers over everything and makes it look as though everyone is swimming underwater. It is deathly hot in here, at least ten degrees hotter than it was outside people move slowly and have rolled up their shirt sleeves above the shoulders, tugged their jeans to their knees, and wherever there is skin,

there is a glistening sheen on it. For a moment I can only stand there and watch. I wish I had a camera. If I ignore the fact that there are hands touching hands and bodies bumping together and a thousand things that are terrible and wrong, I can see that it is beautiful.

Part: 7

#- Nice- butt-hole Liv! Ha- crack head!

Then I realize I am wasting time.

A girl is standing directly in front of me, blocking my way. She has her back to me. I reach out and put a hand on her arm. Her skin is so hot it burns. She turns to me, face red and flushed, craning her head backward to hear.

‘It’s a raid night,’ I say to her, surprised that my voice comes out so steady.

The music is soft, but insistent-it is coming up from a basement of some kind-not as crazy as the last time but just as strange and just as

gorgeous. It reminds me of warm, dripping things, honey, and sunlight, and red leaves swirling down on the wind. But the layers of conversation, the creaking of footsteps and floorboards, make it difficult to hear.

'What?' She sweeps her hair away from her ear.

I open my mouth to say raid but instead of my voice it is someone else's that, comes out: an enormous, mechanical voice bellowing from outside, a voice that seems to shake and rattle from all sides at once, a voice

that cuts through the warmth and the music like a cold razor edge through the skin.

At the same time, the room starts spinning, a swirling mass of red and white lights revolving over terrified, stunned faces.

‘Attention. This is a raid. Do not try to run. Do not try to resist. This is a raid.’

A few seconds later, the door explodes inward and a spotlight as bright as the sun turns everything

white and motionless, turns everything to dust and statue.

Then they let the dogs loose. Kellie- The worst part-the the part I have never- ever forgotten- was its panicked roaring: a horrible, incessant, enraged bellow that sounded somehow human.

That is what I think of as the raiders start flooding the house, pouring in through the shattered door, battering on the windows. That is what I think of like the music cuts off suddenly and instead, the air is full of

barking and screaming and shattering glass, as hot hands push me from the front and the side, and I catch an elbow under my chin and another one in my ribs.

I remember the bear…

Human beings, in their natural state, are unpredictable, erratic, and unhappy. It is only once their animal instincts are controlled that they can be responsible, dependable, and content.

I once saw a news report about a brown bear, that had accidentally been punctured by its trainer at the

Pittsburgh circus during routine training. I was young, but I will never forget the way the bear looked, a mammoth dark blob, tearing around its circle with a ridiculous red paper hat still flopping crazily from its head, ripping into whatever it could get its jaws around: paper streamers, folding chairs, balloons. Its trainer, too: The bear mauled him, turned his face into hamburger meat.

Somehow, I have surged forward in the panicked crowd that is flowing and scrabbling toward the back

of the house. Behind me, I hear dogs snapping their jaws and regulators swinging heavy clubs. Folks are screaming- so many people it sounds like a single voice.

A girl falls behind me, stumbling forward and reaching for me as one of the regulator's batons catches her on the back of the head with a sickening crack. Her fingers tighten momentarily on the cotton of my shirt, and I shake her off and keep running, pushing, squeezing forward. I have no time to be sorry and no time to be

scared. I have no time to do anything but move, push, go, cannot think of anything but escape, escape, escape.

The strange thing is that for a minute in the middle of all that noise and confusion, I see things super clearly, in slow motion, like I am watching a film from a distance: I see a guard dog leap over a guy to my left; I see his knees buckle as he topples forward with the barest, tiniest noise, like a breath or a sigh, a crescent of blood spattering up from his neck, where the dog's teeth tear into him.

A girl with flashing blond hair goes down under the raiders' clubs, and as I see the arc of her hair, for a second my heart goes still, and I think I have died; it is all over. Then she twists her head my way, shouting, as the regulators get her with pepper spray, and I see that she is not Rachel, and relief rushes through me, a wave.

More snapshots. A movie-only a movie. Not happening, could never really happen. A boy and a girl, fighting to make it into one of the side rooms, thinking there is an exit that way.

The door is too small for to enter at once. He is wearing a blue shirt that reads Pittsburgh NAVAL SCHOOL OF THE ARTS, and she has long red hair, bright as a flame. Only five minutes ago they were talking and laughing together, standing so close that if one of them had even tipped forward accidentally they might have kissed.

Now they wrestle, but she is too small. She locks her teeth on his arm like a dog, like a wild thing; he roars, rages grab her by the shoulders,

and slams her back against the wall, out of the way.

She stumbles, falls, slipping, trying to stand up; one of the raiders, an enormous man with the reddest face I have ever seen, reaches down, knots his fingers around her ponytail, and hauls her to her feet.

Naval Conservatory does not get away either. Two raiders follow him, and as I run by- I hear the thud of their clubs, the mangled sound of screaming.

They have gotten the place surrounded. And then the open back door rises in front of me- and beyond it- dark trees, the cool and whispering woods behind the house. If I can make it outside - if I can hide from the lights for long enough- animals, I think. We are animals. People are shoving, pulling, using one another as shields as the raiders keep gaining, surging forward, swinging at us, dogs at our heels, batons whirling so close to my head I can feel the air whooshing on my neck as the wood twirls, twirls near the

back of my skull. I think of searing pain, I think of red.

The crowd is thinning around me as the raiders advance. One by one people is screaming next to me-crack! And dropping, getting wrestled to the ground by three, four, five dogs. Screaming, screaming. Everyone screaming.

Somehow, I have managed to avoid being caught, and I am still rocketing through the narrow, creaking hallways, passing a blur of rooms, a blur of publics and raiders, more lights,

more devastating windows, the sound of engines. I hear a dog barking behind me, and behind that, a raider's pounding footsteps, gaining, gaining, a sharp voice yelling, 'Halt!' and I suddenly realize- I am alone in the hallway. Fifteen more steps - then ten. If I can make it into the darkness-

Five feet from the door and sudden, shooting pain rips through my leg. The dog has gotten its jaws around my calf, and I turn and that is when I see him, the regulator with the massive red face, eyes glittering, smiling-oh,

God, he is smiling, he enjoys this-club raised, ready to swing. I close my eyes, think of pain as big as the ocean, think of a blood-red sea. Think of my mother.

Then I am being jerked to the side, and I hear a crack and a yelp, the regulator saying, ‘Shit.’ The fire in my leg stops and the weight of the dog falls off, and there is an arm around my waist and a voice in my ear-a voice so familiar at that moment it is like I have been waiting for it all along like I have been hearing it forever in my dreams-breathing out:

‘This way.’ Rachel keeps one arm around my waist, half carrying me. We are in a different hallway now, this one smaller and empty. Every time I put weight on my right leg the pain flares up again, searing into my head. The raider is still behind us and pissed Hanna must have pulled me to safety at just the right second, so the raider cracked down on his dog instead of my skull and I know I must be slowing Kellie down, but he does not let me go, not for a second.

‘In here,’ she says, and then we are ducking into another room. We must be in a part of the house that was not being used for the party. This room is pitch-black, although Rachel does not slow down at all, just keeps going through the dark. I let the heaviness of his fingertips guide me-left, right, left, right. It smells like mold in here, besides approximately else- fresh paint and something smoky, like someone has been cooking here. But that is impossible. These houses have been empty- for years.

Behind us, the raider is struggling in the dark. He bumps up against something and curses. A second later something crashes to the ground; glass shatters; more cursing. From the sound of his voice, I can tell that he is falling behind. ‘Up,’ Kellie whispers, so quiet and so close it is like I have only imagined it, and just like that he is lifting me, and I realize I am going out a window, feel the rough wood of the windowsill grate against my back, land on my good foot on the soft, damp grass outside.

Part: 8

Photos of Madalyn or as we girl’s call here- Maddie! No makeup! Yet Maddie always looks gross- to me… ha- love- her too!

Rachel- dick in a condom- I think to myself- A second later Hanna follows soundlessly, materializing beside me in the dark. Though the air is hot, a breeze has picked up, and as it sweeps across my skin I could cry from gratitude and relief.

But we are not safe yet far from it. The darkness is mobile,

twisting, alive with paths of light: Flashlights cut through the woods to our right and left, and in their glare, I see fleeing figures, lit up like ghosts like an angel like the dark that was Jenny, frozen for a moment in the beams. The screams continue, some only a few feet away, some so distant and forlorn you could mistake them for something else-for owl's hoot peacefully in their trees.

Then Kellie sees Jenny all the time that way or, so she said. has taken my hand and we are running again.

Every single step on my right or left foot is a fire down below, a blade. I bite the inside of my cheeks to keep from crying out, as well as taste blood. It is falling apart, and so overgrown with moss and climbing vines that even from only a few feet it was a tangle of bushes and trees. I do what he says without irresolute. A tiny wooden shed has appeared miraculously in the dark. I must stoop to get inside, and when I do the smell of animal urine and the wet dog is so strong, I gag.

Confusion… Scenes from hell: floodlights from the road, shadows falling, bone-cracking, voices shattering apart, dissolving into silence.

‘In here.’ Alex comes in behind me and shuts the door. I hear a rustling and see him kneeling, stuffing a blanket in the gap between the door and the ground. The blanket must be the source of the smell. It reeks.

‘God,’ I whisper, the first thing I have said to him, cupping my hand over my mouth and nose.

‘This way the dogs won’t pick up our scent,’ he whispers back matter-fact- like.

I have never met someone so calm in my life. I think fleetingly that the stories I heard when I was little where true-maybe Invalids are monsters, freaks.

Then I feel embarrassed… He just saved my life.

He saved my life-from the raiders. From the people who are supposed to protect us and keep us safe. From the people who are

supposed to keep us safe from the people like Hanna or her. Nothing makes sense anymore. My head is spinning, and I feel dizzy. I stumble, bumping against the wall behind me, and Alex reaches up to steady me.

'Sit down,' he says, in that same commanding voice he has been using all along. It is comforting to listen to his low, forceful directives, to let myself go. I lower myself to the ground. The floor is damp and rough underneath me.

The moon must have broken through the clouds; gaps in the walls and roof let in little spots of silvery light. I can just make out some shelves beyond Kellie or her or even her. head, a set of cans-paint, maybe? - Piled in one corner. Now that Hanna and I-Rachel, are both sitting there is hardly any room left to maneuver-the whole structure is only a few feet wide.

‘I’m going to look at your leg now, okay?’ He is still whispering. I nod okay. Even when I am sitting down, the dizziness does not subside. He sits

upon his knees and draws my leg into his lap. It is not until he begins rolling up my pant leg that I feel how wet the fabric is against my skin. I must be bleeding. I bite my lip and press my back up hard against the wall, expecting it to hurt, but the feeling of his hands against my skin-cool and strong- somehow dampens the whole kit and caboodle, sliding across the pain like an eclipse blotting the moon dark.

Once he has my pants rolled up to the knee, he tilts me gently, so he

can see the back of my calf. I lean one elbow on the floor, feeling the room swaying. I must be bleeding a lot.

She let your breath out suddenly, a quick sound between her teeth.

‘Is it bad is it not?’ I say, too afraid to look. ‘Hold still,’ he says, like- I know that it is bad, but he will not tell me so, and at that moment I am so flooded with gratitude for him and hatred for the people outside-hunters, primitives; with their sharp teeth and

heavy sticks, and the air goes out of me- and I must struggle to breathe.

I not so into Kellie as I am Hanna, you see that I love them both yet her more, do you get that.

Yet we all want the same boy- so I do what I have too.

It is nine inches cock- so yes… ha- be not- but you will never know.

Hanna reaches into a corner of the shed without removing my leg from his lap. He fiddles with a box of some kind and metal latches creak open. A

second later he is hovering over my leg with a bottle.

'This is going to burn for a second,' he says. Liquid splatters my skin, and the astringent smell of alcohol makes my nostrils flare. Flames lick up my leg and I nearly scream. Alex reaches out a hand, and without thinking I take it and squeeze.

'What is that?' I force out through gritted teeth.

'Rubbing alcohol,' he says. 'Prevents infection.'

‘How did you know it was here?’ I ask, but he does not answer.

He draws his hand away from mine and I realize I have been grabbing on to him, hard. But I do not have the energy to be embarrassed or afraid: The room seems to be pulsing, the half-darkness growing fuzzier.

‘Shit,’ Kellie mutters. ‘You’re bleeding.’

‘It doesn’t hurt that much,’ I whisper, which is a lie. But he is so calm, so together, it makes me want to act brave too.

Everything has taken on a strange, distant quality-the sound of running and shouting outside get warped and weird like they are being filtered through water, and Kellie looks miles away. I start to think I might be dreaming, or about to pass out. And then I decide I am dreaming because as I am watching, Kellie starts peeling her shirt off over her head.

What are you doing? I almost scream. Kellie finishes shaking loose the shirt and begins tearing the fabric into long strips, shooting a nervous

glance at the door, and pausing to listen every time the cloth goes rip.

Part: 9

I’ve never in my whole life seen a guy without a shirt on, except for little kids or from a distance on the beach, when I have been too afraid to look for fear of getting in trouble.

Now I cannot stop staring. The moonlight just touches his shoulder blades, so they glow slightly, like wingtips, like pictures of angels I have seen in textbooks. Hanna, she is thin but muscular, too: When he moves, I

can make out the lines of his arms and chest, so strangely, incredibly, beautifully different from a girl's, a body that makes me think of running and being outside of warmth and sweating. Heat starts beating through me, a thrumming feeling like a thousand tiny birds have been released in my chest.

I am not sure if it is from the bleeding, but the room feels like it is spinning so fast we are in danger of flying out of it, both of us, getting thrown out into the night. Before, Kellie

seemed far away. Now the room is full of him: He is so close I cannot breathe, cannot move, or speak or think. Every time he brushes me with his fingers, time seems to teeter for a second, like it is in danger of dissolving. The entire world is dissolving, I decide, except for us. Us.

'Hey.' He reaches out and touches my shoulder, just for a second, but in that second my body shrinks down to that single point of pressure under his hand and glows with warmth. I have never felt like this, so calm and

peaceful. I am dying… The idea does not upset me, for some reason. It seems funny. ‘You, okay?’ ‘Fine.’ I start to giggle softly. ‘You’re naked.’

‘What?’ Even in the dark, I can tell he is squinting at me.

‘I’ve never seen a boy like-like that.

With no shirt on. Not up close.’ He begins wrapping the shredded T-shirt around my leg carefully, tying it tight. ‘The dog got you good,’ he says.

‘But this should stop the bleeding.’ The phrase stops- the bleeding sounds so clinical and scary it snaps me awake and helps me to focus. Kellie finishes tying off the makeshift bandage. Now the searing pain in my leg has been replaced by dull, throbbing pressure. Alex lifts my leg carefully out of his lap and rests, it on the ground. ‘Okay?’ he says, and I nod.

Then he scoots around next to me, leaning back against the wall like I am so we are sitting side by side, arms just touching at the elbows. I can feel

the heat coming off his bare skin, and it makes me feel hot. I close my eyes and try not to think about how close we are, or what it would feel like to run my hands over his shoulders and chest.

Outside, the sounds of the raid grow increasingly distant, the screams fewer, the voices fainter. The raiders must be passing on. I say a silent prayer that Hana managed to escape; the possibility that she did not is too terrible to contemplate.

Still, Kellie and I do not move. I am so tired I feel like I could sleep

forever. Home seems impossible, incomprehensibly far away, and I do not see how I will ever make it back. Kellie starts speaking all at once, his voice a low, urgent rush: ‘Listen, Liv. What happened at the beach- I am sorry? I should have told you sooner, but I didn’t want to frighten you away.’ ‘You don’t have to explain,’ I say.

‘But I want to explain. I want you to know that I didn’t mean to-’ ‘Listen,’ I cut him off. ‘I’m not going to tell anyone, okay? I’m not going to get you in trouble or anything.’ She pauses.

He turns, to look at me, but I keep my eyes fixed on the darkness in front of us.

'I don't care about that,' she says, lower. Another pause, and then: 'I just don't want you to hate me.' Again, the room seems to be shrinking, closing in around us. I can feel his eyes on me like the hot pressure of touch, but I am too afraid to look at him. I am afraid that if I do, I will lose myself in his eyes, forget all the things I am supposed to say.

Outside, the woods have fallen silent.

The raiders must have left. After a second the crickets begin singing all at once, warbling throatily, a great swelling of sound.

‘Why do you care?’ I say, barely a whisper.

‘I told you,’ he whispers back. I can feel his breath just tickling the space behind my ear, making the hair prick up on my neck. ‘I like you.’

‘You don’t know me,’ I say quickly.

‘I want to, though.’ The room is spinning increasingly quickly. I press up more confidently against the wall, trying to stable myself against the feeling of dizzying movement.

It is impossible: She has an answer for everything. It is too quick. It must be a trick. I press my palms against the damp floor, taking comfort in the solidity of the rough wood.

Part: 10

‘Why me?’

I do not mean to ask it, but the words slide out. ‘I’m nobody.’ I want to say, I am nobody special, but the words dry up in my mouth. This is what I imagine it feels like to climb to the top of a mountain, where the air is so thin you can inhale and inhale and inhale and still feel like you cannot take a breath.

Ray does not answer, and I realize he does not have an answer, just like I suspected- there is no reason for it at all. He has picked me at random,

as a joke, or because he knew I would be too scared to tell on him.

‘My point is that it’s possible to get in and out. Difficult, but possible. I moved in with two strangers-supporters, both and was told to call them my aunt and uncle.’ He shrugs ever so slightly next to me. ‘I didn’t care. I had never known my real parents, and I had been raised by dozens of different aunts and uncles. It didn’t make a difference to me.’

But then he starts speaking. His story is so rapid and fluid you can

tell he has thought about it a lot, the kind of story you tell over and over to yourself until the edges get all smoothed over. ‘I was born in the Wilds.

My mother died right afterward, my father’s death. He never knew he had a son. I lived there for the first part of my life, just bouncing around. All the other’- he hesitates slightly, and I can hear the grimace in his voice- ‘Invalids took care of me together. Like a community thing…’

Outside, the crickets pause temporarily in their song. For a second it is like nothing bad has happened like nothing has happened tonight out of the ordinary at all-just another hot and lazy summer night, waiting for morning to peel it back. Pain knifes through me at that moment, but it has nothing to do with my leg. It strikes me how small everything is, our entire world, everything with meaning-our stores and our raids and our jobs and our lives, even.

Meanwhile, the world just goes on the same as always, night cycling into day and back into the night, an endless circle; seasons shifting and reforming like a monster shaking off its skin and growing it again.

Ray keeps talking. ‘I came into Pitt when I was ten, to join up with the resistance here. I will not tell you how. It was complicated. I got an ID number; I got a new last name, a new home address. There are more of us than you think- Invalids, and supporters, too- more of us than anybody distinguish.

We have people in the police force and all the municipal subdivisions. We have people in the labs, even.’ Goosebumps pop up all over my arms when he says this.

I love her and him too what can I do…

I have fallen to them.

The tied bit with me- at the top of your vagina. do you ever just tickle and pull up where the hair and end and the shat starts, and it pulls the hood up some and feels so good? Just the tip poops out a little, do you do that?

Part: 11

Anne’s face turned colors, as though Maggie was watching her on a screen, and someone had just adjusted the contrast. ‘You’re - you’re joking.’

Maggie managed to shake her head.

‘How?’ Anne said.

Before Maggie could speak, Joh- John cut in, ‘It was my fault.’ At last, Maggie found her voice.

‘No. Joh- John had nothing to do with it. It was me. It was - the game.’

‘The game?’ Anne squinted at Maggie as she had never seen her before. ‘The game?’ ‘Terror,’ Maggie said. Her voice was hoarse. ‘I opened the gates... I must have forgotten to lock them again.’ For a second, Anne was silent. Her face was awful to see white and ghastly. Horrified.

‘But I was the one who told her to do it,’ Joh- John said suddenly. ‘It’s my fault…’

No.’ Maggie was embarrassed that Joh- John felt he had to stand up for her, even as she was grateful to him. ‘He had nothing to do with it.’

‘I did.’ Joh- John’s voice got louder.

He was sweating. ‘I told her to do it. I told all of them to do it. I started the fire at the Graybill place. I’m the one.’

His voice broke. He turned to Maggie.

His eyes were pleading, desperate. ‘I’m a judge. That is what I wanted to tell you. That is what I wanted to explain. What you saw the other day, with Vivian -’ He didn’t finish.

Maggie could not speak either. She felt like time had stopped; they were all transformed into statues. Joh- John’s words were sifting through her like snow, freezing her insides, her ability to speak.

Impossible… Not Joh- John. He had not even wanted her to play…

‘I don’t believe it.’ She heard the words, and only then realized she was speaking.

‘It’s true…’ Now he turned back to Anne. ‘It wasn’t Maggie’s fault. You have to believe me.’ Anne brought her hand briefly to her forehead, as though pressing back pain.

She closed her eyes… Lily was still standing several feet away, shifting her weight, anxious and silent. Anne opened her eyes again. ‘We need to call the police,’ she said quietly. ‘They’ll need to put out the alert.’

Joh- John nodded. But for a second no one moved. Maggie wished Anne would yell-it would be so much easier.

And Joh- John's words kept swirling through her: I told her to do it. I told all of them to do it.

'Come on, Lily,' Anne said.

'Come inside with me.' Maggie started to follow them into the house, but Anne stopped her. 'You wait out here,' she said sharply. 'We'll talk in a bit.'

Her words brought little knife aches of pain to Maggie's stomach. It was all over. Anne would hate her now. Lily shot Maggie a worried glance and then hurried after Anne. Joh- John and

Maggie was left standing alone in the yard, as the sun pushed through the clouds, and the day transformed into a microscope, focusing its heat.

'I'm sorry, Maggie,' Joh- John said. 'I couldn't tell you. I wanted to- you to have to know that. But the rules-'

‘The rules?’ she repeated. The anger was bubbling up from a crack opening inside her. ‘You lied to me. About everything. You told me not to play, and all this time.’

‘I was trying to keep you safe,’ he said. ‘And when I knew you would not back down, I tried to help you.

Whenever I could, I tried.’ Joh-John had moved closer and his arms where out-he was reaching for her. She took a step backward.

‘You almost got me killed,’ she said. ‘The gun- if it wasn’t for Marcel.’

‘I told Marcel to do it,’ Joh-John cut in. ‘I made sure of it.’ Click-click-click. Memories slotted together: Joh- John insisting on taking the shortcut that led past Trigger-Happy Jack’s house. The fireworks at the Graybill house on the Fourth of July, which Joh- John made sure she would see.

A clue: fire.

‘You have to believe me, Maggie.

I never meant to lie to you.’

‘So why did you do it, Joh-John?’

Maggie crossed her arms. She did not want to listen to him. She wanted to be angry. She wanted to give in to the black tide, let it suck away all her other thoughts about the tigers, about how badly she had disappointed Anne, about how she would be homeless again.

‘What did you need to prove so badly, huh?’ More parts of her were flaking off. Crack. ‘That you’re better than us? Smarter than us? We get it,

okay? You're leaving.' Crack. 'You're getting out of here. That makes you smarter than the whole fucking rest of us put together.' Joh- John's mouth was as thin as a line. 'You know what your problem is?' he said quietly. 'You want everything to be shitty. You have a sister who loves you. Friends who love you. I love you, Maggie.' He said it recklessly, in a mumble, and she could not even be happy, because he kept going.

'You've endured almost everyone in Fear. But all you see is the

crap. So, you do not have to believe in anything. So, you'll have an excuse to fail.' Crack. Maggie turned around, so if she started crying again, he would not see. But she realized she had nowhere to go. There was the house, the high bowl of the sky, the sun like a laser.

And she, Maggie, had no place in any of it. The last bits of her broke apart, opened like a wound: she was all hurt and anger.

'You know what I wish? I wish you were gone already.'

She thought he might start yelling. She was almost hoping he would. But instead, he just sighed and rubbed his forehead. ‘Look, Maggie. I do not want to fight with you. I want you to understand-’

‘Didn’t you hear me? Just go.

Leave… Get out of here.’ She swiped at her eyes with the palm of her hand. His voice was screaming in her head. You want everything to be shitty - so you will have an excuse to fail.

‘Maggie.’ Joh- John put a hand on her shoulder, and she shook him off.

‘I don’t know how many other ways I can say it.’ Joh- John hesitated. She felt him close to her, felt the warmth of his body, like a comforting force, like a blanket. For one wild second, she thought he would refuse, he would turn around and hug her and tell her he was never leaving. For one wild second, it was what she wanted more than anything. Instead, she felt his fingers just graze her elbow.

‘I did it for you,’ he said in a faint voice. ‘I was planning to give you the money.’ His voice cracked a little.

‘Everything I’ve ever done is for you, Maggie.’ Then he was gone. He turned around, and by the time she could not stand it anymore and her legs were about to give out and the anger had turned to eight different tides pulling her to pieces, and she thought to turn around and call out for him-by then he was in the car and could not hear her.

It was an upside-down day for Carp. Joh- John Marks turned himself in to the police for the murder of Little Kelly- even though, as it turned out,

Little Kelly had not been killed in the fire at the Graybill house.

Still, no one could believe it: Joh- John Marks, that nice kid from down the way, whose dad had a frame shop over in Hudson. Shy kid. One of the good ones. At the police station, Joh- John denied the fire had anything to do with Panic. A prank, he said. Upside down and inside out.

Sign of the messed-up times we are living in. That night, Kirk Finnegan came outside when his dogs began to go crazy. He was carrying a rifle,

suspecting drunk kids, or his piece-of-shit neighbor, who had recently started parking on Kirk's property and could not be convinced that it was not his right. Instead, he saw a tiger.

A f*cking tiger, right there in his yard, with its enormous mouth around one of Kirk's cocker spaniels.

He thought he was dreaming, hallucinating, drunk. He was so scared he peed in his boxer shorts and did not notice until later.

He acted without thinking, swung the rifle up, fired four shots

straight into the tiger’s flank, kept firing, even after it collapsed…

Even after by some grace-of-God miracle its jaws went slack, and his spaniel got to his feet and started barking again-kept firing, because those eyes kept staring at him, dark as an accusation or a lie.

Part: 12

TUESDAY,

AUGUST 16

Maggie-

MAGGIE HAD SUCCESSFULLY MANAGED TO AVOID talking to Anne for an entire day.

After her fight with Joh- John, she had walked two miles to the gully, and spent the afternoon cursing and throwing rocks at random things (street signs, when there were any; fences; and abandoned cars.)

His words played on endless repeat in her head. You want everything to be shitty - so you will have an excuse to fail.

Unfair, she wanted to scream. But a second, smaller voice in her head said, True.

Those two words -unfair and true-pinged back and forth in her head, like her mind, was a giant Ping-Pong table. By the time she returned from the gully, it was evening and both Anne and Lily were gone.

She was seized with a sudden and irrational fear that Anne had taken Lily back to ‘Fresh Pines.’ Then she saw a note on the kitchen table.

Grocery store, it said simply.

It was only seven-thirty, but Maggie curled up in bed, under the covers, despite the stifling heat, and waited for sleep to put a stop to the Ping-Pong game in her mind.

Nonetheless, when she woke up early when the sun was still making its first, tentative entry into the room, poking like an exploratory animal through the blinds -she knew there was no avoiding it anymore.

Overnight, the Ping-Pong game had been resolved, and the word true had appeared victorious.

What Joh- John had said was true. She felt even worse than she had the day before, which she had not believed was possible.

Already, she could hear Anne noises from downstairs: the clink-clink-clink of dishes coming out of the dishwasher, the squeak of the old wooden floorboards.

When waking up in ‘Fresh Pines’ to the usual explosion of sounds-cars backfiring, people yelling, doors banging and dogs barking and loud music-she had dreamed of just this kind

of home, where mornings where quiet and mothers did dishes and got up early and then yelled at you to get up.

Funny how in such an abbreviated time, Anne's house had become more like home than 'Fresh Pines' had ever been. And she had ruined it. Another truth…

By the time she came downstairs, Anne was on the porch. She called, Maggie out to her immediately, and Maggie knew this was it.

Maggie was shocked to see a squad car parked some little ways down the drive, half pulled off into the underbrush. The police officer was outside, leaning his butt against the hood of the car, drinking a coffee, and smoking.

‘What’s he doing here?’ Maggie said, forgetting for a moment to be scared. Anne was sitting on the porch swing without swinging. Her knuckles around her mug of tea were very white.

‘They think the other one might come back.’ She looked down. ‘The

ASPCA would at least use a stun gun…’ ‘The other one?’ Maggie said. ‘You didn’t hear?’ Anne said. And she told her: about Kirk Finnegan and his dog and the gunshots, twelve in total.

By the time she was done, Maggie’s mouth was as dry as sand. She wanted to hug Anne, but she was paralyzed, unable to move.

Anne shook her head. She kept her eyes on the mug of tea; she had not yet taken a sip. ‘I know it was irresponsible, keeping them here.’ When she finally looked up, Maggie

saw she was trying not to cry. ‘I just wanted to help. It was Larry’s dream, you know. Those poor cats. Did you know there are only thirty-two hundred tigers left in the wild? And I don’t even know which one was killed.’

‘Anne.’ Maggie finally found her voice. Even though she was standing, she felt like she was shrinking from the inside out until she was little-kid-sized.

‘I’m so, so, so sorry.’ Anne shook her head. ‘You shouldn’t be

playing Panic,' she said, and her voice momentarily held an edge.

'I've heard too much about that game. People have died. But I do not blame you,' she added. Her voice softened again.

'You're not incredibly happy, are you?' Maggie shook her head. She wanted to tell Anne everything: about how she had been dumped by Matt just when she was ready to say I love you; about how she realized now she had not loved him at all, because she had always been in love with Joh- John;

about her fears that she would never get out of Carp and it would eat her up, swallow her as it had her mom, turn her into one of those brittle, bitter women who are old and drug-eaten and done at twenty-nine.

But she could not speak. There was a thick knot in her throat.

'Come here.' Anne patted the swing next to her. And then, when Maggie sat down, she was shocked: Anne put her arms around her.

And suddenly Maggie was crying into her shoulder, saying, 'I'm

sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.’ ‘Maggie.’ Anne pulled away but kept one hand on Maggie’s shoulder. With her other hand, she brushed the hair back from Maggie’s face, where it was sticking to her skin. Maggie was too upset to be embarrassed. ‘Listen to me.

I am not sure what this means for you and Lily. What I- did-keeping the tigers here -was illegal. If your mom wants to make a big deal out of it if the county wants the police might force you to go home. I’ll do everything I can to keep you here for as long as you and

Lily want to stay, but-’ Maggie nearly choked. ‘You-you're not kicking me out?’

Anne stared at her. ‘Of course not.’ ‘But-’ Maggie could not believe it. She must have misheard. ‘I was the one who let the tigers out. It’s all my fault.’

Anne rubbed her eyes and sighed. Maggie never thought of Anne as old, but at that moment, she truly looked at it.

Her fingers were brittle and sun-spotted, her hair a dull and uniform gray.

Someday she would die.

Maggie's throat was still thick from crying, and she swallowed the feeling.

'You know, Maggie, I was with my husband for thirty years. Since we were kids. When we first got together, we had nothing. We spent our honeymoon hitchhiking in California, camping out.

We could not afford anything else. And some years were extremely hard. He could be moody…'

She made a restless motion with her hands. 'My point is, when you

love someone, when you care for someone, you have to do it through the good and the bad. Not just when you are happy, and it is easy. Do you understand?'

Maggie nodded, she felt as though there was a glass ball on her chest- something delicate and lovely, gorgeous that might shatter and crack if she said the wrong word if she disturbed the balance in any way.

'So - you're not mad at me?' she asked. Anne half laughed. 'Of course, I am mad at you,' she said. 'But

that doesn’t mean I don’t want you to stay. That doesn’t mean I’ve stopped caring.’ Maggie looked down at her hands. Once again, she was too overwhelmed to speak.

She felt as though, just for a second, she had understood something vastly important, had had a glimpse of it: love, simple and undemanding.

‘What is going to happen?’ she said, after a minute.

‘I don’t know.’ Anne reached over and took one of Maggie’s hands. She squeezed… ‘It’s okay to be scared,

Maggie,’ she said, in a muffled voice, like she was telling her a secret.

Maggie thought of Joh- John, and the fight she had had with Nat. She thought about everything that had happened over the summer, all the changes and tension and weird shifts, as though the air was blowing from somewhere unfamiliar. ‘I’m scared all the time,’ she whispered.

‘You’d be an idiot if you weren't,’ Anne said. ‘And you wouldn’t be brave, either.’ She stood up. ‘Come on. I am going to put the kettle on. This

tea is ice cold.’ Joh- John had come clean to the police. He had been questioned for the better part of three hours and had at last been released back home to his father, pending official charges.

But he had lied about one thing. The game was not over. There were still three players left.

It was time for the final challenge.

It was time for Joust.

Part: 13

THURSDAY,

AUGUST 18

Marcel-

Marcel KNEW IT WAS JUST A MATTER OF TIME before Joh- John came to see him. He did not wait long.

Just three days after Joh- John had turned himself in to the police for the Graybill fire, Marcel came home from work and spotted Joh- John's car.

He was not outside, though; Marcel was surprised to see that Dayna had let him in. Joh- John was sitting on

the couch, hands on his knees, knees to his chin, he was so tall, and the couch was so low. And Dayna was reading in the corner like it was normal like they were friends.

‘Hey,’ Marcel said. Joh- John stood up, looking relieved. ‘Let us go outside, okay?’ Dayna looked at Marcel suspiciously. He could tell she was waiting for a sign, an indication that everything was okay. But he refused to give it to her. She had betrayed him-by changing, by suddenly flipping the script. Panic had been their game, a

plan they had made together, a shared desire for revenge.

He knew that nothing could bring his sister back, and that, hurting Ray, or even killing him, would not restore Dayna’s legs. But that was the whole point: Ray and Luke Hanrahan had stolen something Marcel could never get back.

So-o - Marcel was going to steal something from them. Now that Dayna was shifting, turning into someone he did not know or recognize- telling him he was immature, criticizing

him for playing, spending all her time with Ricky-he felt it even more strongly. It was not fair. It was all their fault.

Someone had to pay. Outside, he gestured for Joh- John to follow him into Meth Row. For once, there were signs of life here. Several people were sitting out on their sagging porches, smoking, drinking beers. One woman had snaked a TV out into the front yard with her. Everyone was hoping to catch a glimpse of the tiger; in just a few days, it had become an obsession.

‘I’m out, you know,’ Joh- John said abruptly. ‘I won’t get my cut or anything.

It was all pointless.’ His voice was bitter. Marcel felt almost bad for him. He wondered why Joh- John had ever agreed to judge, to go along with it. Or why anyone else agreed to it, for that matter. All of them- the players, the judges, -Digging, even had their secrets. The money was only part of it, and the stakes were much higher for each of them.

Marcel said, ‘We’re almost at the end. Why back out now?’

‘I don’t have a choice. I broke the rules. I talked.’ Joh- John took off his hat, ran a hand through his hair, then smashed his hat back on. ‘Besides, I hate it. I always have. F*cking Fear…

It drives people crazy. It is crazy. I only did it because-’ He looked down at his hands. ‘I wanted to give Maggie my cut,’ he said quietly. ‘When she started playing, I had to keep going. To help her.

And keep her safe.’ Marcel said nothing. In a screwed-up way, they were both acting out of love. Marcel felt sad that he had not gotten to know Joh- John better. There was so much he regretted. Not spending more time with Maggie, for example. They could have been real friends.

And Nat, of course. He would royally screw things up with her. He wondered if all of life would be like this: regret piled on regret.

‘Did you ever do something bad for a good reason?’ Joh- John blurted out suddenly.

Marcel almost laughed. Instead, he simply answered, ‘Yes…!’

‘So, what does that make us?’

Joh- John said. ‘Good, or bad?’ Marcel shrugged. ‘Both, I guess,’ he said. ‘Like everybody else.’ He felt a sudden pang of guilt. What he was doing -what he wanted to do to Ray-was bad. Worse than anything he had ever done.

Nevertheless, there was that old saying: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. That is all he was doing. Getting even.

He was not the one who had started this.

Joh- John turned to him and stopped walking. ‘I need to know what you’re going to do,’ he said. Joh- John looked so lost, standing there with his big arms and legs as if he did not know how to work them.

‘I’m going to keep playing,’ Marcel said quietly. ‘We’re almost done. But not quite, not yet…’

Joh- John exhaled loudly, as though Marcel had just punched him in the stomach, even though he must have been expecting it. And Marcel suddenly knew how he could make Joh- John feel better, how he could do something good for a change, and how he could make sure that Ray lost.

‘I can keep Maggie safe,’ Marcel said. Joh- John stared at him. ‘I can make sure she doesn’t go up

against Ray. I will make sure she does not get hurt. Deal?' Joh- John watched him for several long minutes.

Marcel could tell he was struggling with something; he did not trust- Marcel completely. Marcel could not blame him.

'What do I have to do?' Joh-John said.

Marcel felt a weight lift from his chest. One step closer. Everything was slotting into place.

‘A car,’ he said. ‘I need to borrow a car.’

Marcel had been worried Maggie would not listen to him. He was the one who had told her all deals were, off, no splits. However, when he asked her to meet him at Dot’s, she agreed. It was ten p.m. the only time the dinner was ever empty, in between the dinner rush and the late-night crowd when couples blasted from the bar next door came in for pancakes and coffee to sober them up.

He explained what he needed her to do. She had ordered a coffee, made it light with cream. Now she stared at him mid-sip.

She set her cup back down.

‘You’re asking me to lose?’ she said.

‘Keep your voice down,’ Marcel said. His mom had worked the early shift and was out with Bill Kelly-they were goddamn inseparable at this, point-but he knew everyone else in Dot’s. Including Ricky, whom he could see every time the kitchen door opened

and closed, grinning, and waving at him like an idiot.

Marcel had to admit the kid was nice. He had already sent out a free grilled cheese and some mozzarella sticks.

‘Look, you don’t want to go up against Ray, do you? The kid’s a beast.’ Marcel felt a tightening in his throat. He thought about why he was doing this- thought about Dayna wheeled home for the first time, Dayna falling out of bed in the night and crying for help, unable to climb back into bed.

Dayna wheeling around, hopped up on pain meds- comatose. And even though she had seemed better and happier lately- hopeful, even he, Marcel, would never- ever forget. ‘He’ll knock you off the road, Maggie. You’ll end up losing anyway.’

She made a face but said nothing.

He could tell she was thinking about it.

‘If we play it my way, you still win,’ he said, leaning over the table,

tacky from years of accumulated grease.

‘We split the money. And nobody gets hurt.’ Except for Ray. She was quiet for a minute. Her hair was swept back into a ponytail, and she was flushed from a summer outside. All her freckles had merged into a tan. She looked pretty. He wished he could tell her that he thought she was great. That he was sorry they had never been closer.

That he had fallen for her best friend and had messed it up.

But none of that mattered now.

‘Why?’ she asked finally, turning back to him. Her eyes were clear, grayish green, like an ocean reflecting the sky.

‘Why do you want it so bad? It is not even the money, is it? It is about the win. It’s about beating Ray.’

‘Don’t worry about it,’ Marcel said a little. The kitchen doors swung open again and there was Ricky, his cook’s whites streaked with marinara sauce and grease, grinning, and giving him the thumbs-up. Jesus. Did Ricky

think he was on a date? He turned his attention back to Maggie. ‘Listen. I promised Joh- John I would-’

‘What’s Joh- John got to do with it?’ she asked sharply, cutting him off.

‘Everything,’ Marcel said. He drained his Coke glass of ice, enjoying the burn on his tongue. ‘He wants you to be safe.’

Maggie looked away again. ‘How do I know I can trust you?’ she said finally.

‘That’s the thing about trust.’ He crunched an ice cube between his teeth.

‘You don’t know.’

She stared at him for a long second.

‘All right,’ she said finally. ‘I’ll do it.’ Outside, at the edge of the parking lot, the trees were dancing in the wind. Some of the leaves had already begun to turn. Gold ate up their edges. Others were splotched with red, as though diseased. Less than three

weeks until Labor Day and the official end of summer.

Besides only a week until the showdown. After saying goodbye to Maggie, Marcel did not go home straight away but spent some time walking the streets. He smoked two cigarettes, not because he wanted them, but because, he was enjoying the dark and the quiet and the cool wind, the smells of autumn coming: a clean smell, a wood smell, like a house newly swept and sprayed down.

He wondered whether the tiger was still loose. It must be he had not heard anything about its capture. He half hoped he would see it, and half feared he would.

Overall, the conversation with Maggie had gone easier than he had expected. He was so close.

Rigging the explosion, he knew, would be the hard part.

Part: 14

MONDAY,

AUGUST 22

Maggie-

IN THE DAYS FOLLOWING THE

TIGERS' ESCAPE, MAGGIE was so- anxious she could not sleep. She kept expecting Krista to show up with some court order, demanding that Lily return home. Or, even worse, for the police officers or the ASPCA to show up and haul Anne off to jail.

What would she do then? But as more days passed, she relaxed. Krista realized she was happier with her daughters out of the house. That

she was not meant to be a mother. All the things Maggie had heard her say a million times. And although the police officers floated in and out, still trying to locate the second tiger, still patrolling Anne's property, and the ASPCA showed up to verify the conditions of the other animals and make sure they were all legal, Anne was not clapped in handcuffs and dragged away, as Maggie had feared.

Maggie knew, deep down, that her situation at Anne's was temporary. She could not stay here forever. In the

fall, Lily had to go back to school. Anne was floating them, paying for them, but how long would that last? Maggie had to get a job, pay Anne back, do something. She just kept clinging to the hope that Panic would fix it: that with the money she earned, even if she had to split it with Marcel, she could rent a room from Anne or get her own space with Lily.

The longer she stayed away from ‘Fresh Pines,’ the more certain she became she would never, ever go back there.

She belonged here, or somewhere like it somewhere with space, where no neighbors were crawling up your butt all the time and there was no shouting, no sounds of bottles breaking, and people blasting music all night. Somewhere between animals and towering trees and that fresh smell of hay and poop that somehow was pleasant. It was amazing how much she loved making the rounds, cleaning out the chicken pen and brushing the horses down, and even sweeping the stalls. It was

amazing, too, how good it felt to be wanted somewhere.

Because, Maggie believed, now, what Anne had said to her. Anne cared. Maybe even loved her, a little bit.

Which changed everything.

Three days until the final challenge. Now that Maggie knew how it would go down-that she would only be called on to lose in the first round of Joust, to Marcel-she felt incredibly relieved. The first thing she was going to do with the money bought Lily a new

bike, which she had been eyeing when they took a trip to Target the other day.

No! First, she would give Anne some money, and then she would buy a bike.

And then maybe a nice sundress for herself, and some strappy leather sandals. Something pretty to wear when she finally worked up the courage to talk to Joh- John-if she did.

She fell asleep and dreamed of him. He was standing with her on the edge of the water tower, telling her to jump, jump. Beneath her-far beneath

her- was a swollen rush of water, interspersed with bright white lights, like unblinking eyes pasted in the middle of all that black water.

He kept telling her not to be afraid, and she did not want to tell him she was terrified, so weak she could not move. Then Marcel was there. ‘How are you going to win if you’re scared of the jump?’ he was saying. Suddenly Joh-John was gone, and the ledge under her feet was not metal, but a kind of wood, half-rotten, unstable.

Boom!

Marcel was swinging at it with a baseball bat, whittling away the wood, sending showers of splinters down toward the water. Boom. ‘Jump, Maggie.’ Boom. ‘Maggie.’

‘Maggie…’

Maggie woke up to double-ness- Lily whispering her name urgently, standing in the space between their beds; and, like an echo, a voice from outside.

‘Maggie Lynn!’ the voice cried. Boom. The sound of a fist on the front door. ‘Get down here! Get down here so

I can talk to you.' 'Mom,' Lily said, just as Maggie placed the voice. Lily's eyes were wide.

'Get in bed, Lily,' Maggie said. She was awake in an instant. She checked her phone. 1:14 a.m. In the hall, a small fissure of light was showing underneath Anne's bedroom door.

Maggie heard sheets rustling. So, she had been woken too. The banging was still going, and the muffled cries of 'Maggie!

I know you are there. You going to ignore your mother?' Even before reaching the door, Maggie knew her mom was drunk. The porch light was on. When she opened the door, her mom was standing with one hand to her eyes, like she was shielding them from the sun. She was a mess.

Hair frizzy; shirt so low Maggie could see all the wrinkles of her cleavage and the white half-moons where her bikini had prevented a tan; jeans with stains; enormous wedge heels. She was having trouble standing

in one place and kept taking miniature steps for balance.

‘What the hell are you doing here?’ ‘What am I doing here?’ She slurred… ‘What are you doing here?’ ‘Leave.’ Maggie took a step onto the porch, hugging herself. ‘You have no right to be here. You have no right to come barging.’

‘Right? Right? I got every right.’ Her mom took an unsteady step forward, trying to move past her. Maggie blocked her, grateful, for the

first time, that she was so big. Krista started shouting,

‘Lily! Lily Anne! Where are you, baby?’

‘Stop it.’ Maggie tried to grab Krista by the shoulders, but her mom reeled away from her, swatting her hand.

‘What’s going on?’ Anne had appeared behind them, blinking, wearing an old bathrobe. ‘Maggie? Is everything okay?’

‘You.’ Krista took two steps forward before Maggie could stop her.

‘You stole my babies.’ She was weaving, swaying on her shoes. ‘You a mother fucking bitch, I should-’

‘Mom, stop!’ Maggie hugged herself tightly, trying to keep her insides together, trying to keep everything from spilling out.

And Anne was saying, ‘Okay, let us calm down, let us everyone calm down.’

Hands up, like she was trying to keep Krista at bay.

‘I don’t need to calm down-’

‘Mom, stop it!’

‘Get out of my way-’

‘Hold on, just hold on.’ And then a voice from the darkness beyond the porch: ‘What’s the trouble?’ A flashlight clicked on, just as the porch light went off. It swept over all of them in turn, like a pointed finger. Someone emerged from the dark, came heavily up the stairs, as the porch light, in

response to his movement, clicked on again. The rest of them were momentarily frozen. Maggie had forgotten there was a patrol car parked in the woods. The police officer was blinking rapidly like he had been sleeping.

‘The problem,’ Krista said, ‘is that this woman has my babies. She stole them.’ The police officer's jaw was moving rhythmically like he was chewing gum.

His eyes moved from Krista to Maggie, to Anne, then back again. His

jaw hinged left, right. Maggie held her breath.

‘That your car, ma’am?’ he said finally, jerking his head over his shoulder, where Krista’s car was parked.

Krista looked at it. Looked back at him. Something flickered in her eyes.

‘Yeah, so?’

He kept chewing, watching her.

‘Legal limit .08.’ ‘I’m not drunk.’ Krista’s voice was rising. ‘I’m as

sober as you are.' 'You mind stepping over here for a minute?' Maggie found herself ready to throw her arms around his neck and say thank you. She wanted to explain, but her breath was lodged in her throat.

'I do mind.' Krista sidestepped the police officer as he took a step toward her. She nearly stumbled over one of the flowerpots. He reached out and grabbed her elbow. She tried to shake him off.

'Ma'am, please. If you could just walk this way-'

‘Let go of me.’ Maggie watched it in slow motion.

There was a swell of noise. Shouting. And Krista was swinging her arm, bringing her fist to the officer’s face. The punch seemed amplified by a thousand: a ringing, hollow noise.

And then time sped forward again, and the police officer was twisting Krista’s arms behind her as she bucked and writhed like an animal. ‘You are under arrest for assaulting a police officer.’

‘Let go…!’

‘You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law.’

She was like- handcuffed. Maggie did not know whether to feel relieved or terrified. Both, Krista was still shouting at the police officer led her off the porch, toward the squad car- calling up to Lily, screaming about her rights. Then she was in the car and the door closed and there was silence, except for the engine running on, the spit of gravel as the police officer turned a circle. A sweep of headlights.

Then darkness. The porch light had gone off again.

-And-

Maggie was shaking. When she could finally speak, the only thing she could say was: ‘I hate her.’ Then again: ‘I hate her.’

‘Come on, sweetie.’ Anne put her arm around Maggie’s shoulders. ‘Let us go inside.’

Maggie exhaled some, she let the anger go with it. They stepped into the house together, into the coolness of

the hall, the patterns of shadow and moonlight that already looked familiar.

She thought of Krista, raging away in the back of a police car. Her stomach started to unknot. Now everyone would know the truth: how Krista was, and what Maggie and Lily were escaping.

Anne squeezed Maggie. ‘It’s going to be okay,’ she said. ‘You’re going to be okay.’

Maggie looked at her. She managed a smile. ‘I know,’ she said.

The end of August was the saddest time of the year in Carp.

The saddest time everywhere? Every year, no matter what the weather, the public pools were suddenly clogged with people, the parks carpeted in picnic blankets and beach towels, the road packed bumper-to-bumper with weekenders descending on Copake Lake.

A shimmering veil of exhaust hung over the trees, intermingling with the smell of charcoal and smoke from a hundred fire pits. It was the final,

explosive demonstration of summer, the line in the sand, a desperate attempt to hold fall…

This is the first thing you will open, do not let it stop you unless you are saying you cannot handle the fact that you are being a teen girl hypocrite, remember were just girls being girls and that the next page is going to make you judge me…

Yet should I judge you first if you close the book of my life, yet, if you think about it- you are a girl, and at some point, in your day you would like

me, and looking up to your hero- just like me, and she will always be.

This is my disclaimer now- if you do not want to know me over me being me, then go away… yet I am sure you will like me, and then maybe not- it is up to you.

You will understand by the end…

‘Say HELLO to my sister!’

(Picture this… She has her hand up in this photo- not looking a day over pubescent- yet she thinks she is a

hot woman- and to me being a woman means you either have been penetrated, or you have hardcore intercourse, her eyes flirty her top pushed up showing her mosquito, she calls boobs, she waving like a dumb but, and a sinful smile, and the tucked tight line she calls her goodies and the bean that looks like there is too much hanging from it.)